

A

PLAIN STATEMENT

WITH REFERENCE TO

MEDICAL REFORM.

PRESENTED TO THE HONOURABLE MEMBERS CONSTITUTING THE SELECT PARLIAMENTARY
COMMITTEE ON MEDICAL REGISTRATION.

BY

EDWIN LEE,

ONE OF THE WITNESSES NOMINATED TO GIVE EVIDENCE BY THE COMMITTEE OF THE
ASSOCIATED SURGEONS OF ENGLAND.

“Audite alterem partem.”

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IN a pamphlet inscribed to the Right Honourable Sir James Graham, and published with the view of imparting information respecting the medical organization of France, the Italian and German states, which might be serviceable towards the more effectual reform of our own, I endeavoured to direct attention to the more prominent abuses which have been suffered to exist in this country for so long a period, to the detriment of the public, and to the disunion and deterioration of the profession, adducing the opinions of competent persons which agree in the main, as to the best means of remedying these abuses, which originate in the absence of legislative control, or superintendence over the various bodies to which the medical interests of the community are entrusted,—an anomaly which has excited the surprise of those foreigners who have visited our institutions; and on the present occasion, in briefly reverting to them, I prefer, as before, to quote the language of some of those who have considered the subject of medical reform in its general bearings, than too freely to obtrude my own; by which means a more impartial appreciation of it is likely to be formed.

Referring to the deficiency of information which exists upon

this important question, so deeply affecting the welfare of the community, Professor Grant observed, in a pamphlet published a few years ago—"The ignorance and supineness of our legislature, as to everything connected with medical affairs, the total want of representation of our profession in the government of the state, and the despotic powers granted to our irresponsible corporations, have rendered the medical community of England not only destitute of all redress or appeal against arbitrary oppression, but more disunited, disaffected, and degraded, than the subjects of eastern despots. The irresponsible members of the self-elected juntas acting collectively in the secrecy and disguise of committees, clubs, and councils, are guilty of acts, as every one knows, which they would not dare to perpetrate on their individual responsibility, and thus they have unblushingly but notoriously, sunk the standard of medical education and attainments in our country; they have dismembered and disaffected the profession, they have made its contention a proverb of ridicule, and ruined its respectability; they have obstructed every advancement, and especially in such departments as depended more immediately on their influence for support; every improvement introduced has been made not by their aid, but always in despite of their opposition; they have debased the generous practitioner of medicine from a benevolent and charitable philanthropist, to an arrogant, contentious, illiberal, avaricious and selfish misanthrope."

"We have at present totally independent medical examinations instituted, and totally independent medical licences granted by the University of Edinburgh, the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh, the University of Glasgow, the Faculty of Physic and Surgery of Glasgow, the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh, the Universities of Aberdeen, St. Andrews, and of Dublin, the Army and Navy Medical Board, the Dublin Apothecaries Company, the Dublin College of Surgeons, the London College of Surgeons, the Apothecaries Company, the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, the London College of Physicians,—an absurdity of legislation unparalleled in the history of any civilized country, the most ruinous to the best interests of

the community, and the most injurious which the human imagination could devise to the respectability and usefulness of the medical profession in England.”*

An influential member of one of the English corporations admits that “these bodies are all independent of each other; there is no bond of union between them; they have to legislate for a profession, the different branches of which are necessarily much connected with each other, but they all act separately. They are responsible only to themselves, and to the slow operation of public opinion, and we cannot shut our eyes to the fact that their interests are not always identical with those of the public.”†

A principal reason why so little has been generally known as to the state of the profession, and the abuses which press upon it, is referrible to the circumstance, that when inquiries have been instituted on the part of the legislature, the medical committees have too exclusively sought information from those interested in supporting the prevailing system, which induced Sir James Clark to remark in a letter addressed to Sir James Graham, “It would appear that the members of the medical corporations are alone consulted upon the subject, and that they, as might be expected, are strenuously exerting themselves, to obtain all they can each for his own institution, while the claims and feelings of the great body of the profession seem likely to be lost sight of. Permit me, however, most respectfully to remark that it is the general practitioner whom a sound measure of medical reform is most calculated to benefit. Let me remind you also that it is they who are principally calling for reform, and who, believing that they have little to expect at the hands of the present medical bodies, look to the legislature through you, sir, to improve their position.”

The chief abuse to which this power of granting licenses to practise possessed by so many bodies has given rise, consists in the

* The Present State of the Medical Profession in England, being the annual Oration before the British Medical Association, by Robert Grant, M.D., F.R.S., &c. 1841.

† Article, Medical Reform, in the Quarterly Review.

competition which has taken place between them, by facilitating the examinations, in order to induce candidates to present themselves before the one in preference to the other—the fees being for the most part divided among the examiners, (which it is scarcely necessary to say is not the case in any other country.) The consequences of this abuse have been so apparent in the deterioration of the profession, as to have repeatedly given rise to strong animadversions in the medical journals—one or two extracts from which I will subjoin. Thus the *Medical Gazette* observes—“The mercenary competition which exists among the licensing bodies of Great Britain and Ireland, is the secret cause of the degradation of the profession. Rules are relaxed, and the fees for diplomas are reduced, in order to attract candidates; and young men may become physicians or surgeons at any age which renders it quite certain, that either their preliminary or their medical education must have been shamefully neglected. Until this scandalous competition is suppressed, there can be but little hope that the profession will assume that respectable position in the social scale to which it is justly entitled. When every street in the metropolis and in great provincial towns is overrun with medical practitioners, the schools and colleges vie with each other in lowering fees, and in reducing the period of study and amount of qualifications to a minimum. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that English medical practitioners should everywhere complain that they are unable to live by the practice of their profession.”*

And in another place the same journal further observes,

“A contemporary has suggested that it would be a benefit to the profession, if the universities and colleges of the United Kingdom were prohibited from granting diplomas for several years, and arbitrary as such a rule may appear, we verily believe that it would be attended with less evil to the community, and to the profession itself, than the continuance of the practice here brought to light, viz. of sending out yearly on the population of this country an army of 269 physicians, 660 surgeons, and 373 apothecaries, deriving their qualifications from sixteen dif-

* September 18th, 1847.

ferent systems of study, and receiving their licences to practise from so many different colleges, universities, and societies."

The Edinburgh Medical and Surgical Journal, in the January number of this year, also refers to the evil results "which have happened to a great extent, and which it must be the business of the legislature to cure, viz., from the surrendering the profession to be mismanaged by certain great medical corporations for their own selfish and ambitious purposes. It is a disgrace to our legislature that they have made no progress hitherto in the cure of evils of the nature of which they are or ought to be fully aware. Far be it from us to desire the destruction of our medical colleges; but our legislators will never make any progress in the cure of the intolerable anomalies and grievances of medical legislation, if they do not resolve to turn a deaf ear to remonstrances proceeding from such bodies as are founded, as they too generally are, on selfish and exclusive views; and if they do not base their measures on public interests alone, to which the whole machinery of medical schools, colleges, and incorporations, ought in all reason to be altogether subordinate and subservient."

The laxity of examination was formerly such that, according to the evidence of Mr. Guthrie, (himself a member of the Council,) as quoted by Sir James Clark, many were allowed to pass "who could not spell very common words in their native language." "What the requirements of the candidates for the college diploma were before 1836, Mr. Guthrie does not inform us; but such it seems is the deplorable state of ignorance of those permitted to pass the Royal College of Surgeons. Are men so educated worthy of being entrusted with the important duties attached to the ordinary medical attendants of the community? Is it surprising that quacks and quackery should thrive when such is the education of the regular practitioner? Such a state of things ought not to exist in a civilized country, and would not have existed at the present day had the institutions entrusted with the regulation of medical education done their duty."*

It would be needless to dwell further upon the consequences of

* Letter to Sir James Graham.

the injury thus inflicted upon the public, by this facility of obtaining licences to practise, as such must be apparent on the slightest consideration ; and the extent to which this abuse is still carried, may be inferred from the circumstance which lately occurred, and has been adverted to in the evidence before the parliamentary committee, viz., of the pastrycook from Taunton, who, after a year's sojourn in London, was able to return with the diploma of the College of Surgeons, and has continued to practise homœopathy under its sanction, which affords a sufficient corroboration, that the same spirit actuates the medical corporations as heretofore, as indeed is shown by the evidence of Mr. Guthrie, who says, “ It has been stated that the examinations of the present day are more severe than the examinations twenty years ago, and that the examiners have been influenced by what is called the pressure of public opinion ; in this there is not the slightest truth whatever : on the contrary, the examinations of the present day, are, if any thing, rather less severe than the examinations which took place twenty years ago. I am particularly anxious to state that fact.” How far the proceeds of the examinations have been a consideration for the examiners, may be inferred from what Mr. Guthrie further observes, that when he came to the court of examiners, many were elderly men, some lived to ninety or ninety-five, and could not sit through the examination without going to sleep, and that in consequence of the poverty of several of them, the situation of examiner was a most important consideration for them, and that it was proposed by the council to pension off at £150 per annum those above seventy years of age.

Would such a state of matters, on so important a question as that affecting the public health, be tolerated in any country where the protection of government is afforded to all classes of the community ? I have already adverted to the arrangement by which a retiring examiner of the College of Surgeons was to receive from his successor (not the next in rotation) half the yearly examination fees. This, as well as the case of the Taunton pastrycook and other instances of great injustice, have occasioned a good deal of outcry ; but as in

the practice of medicine, so also on many other occasions in England, isolated cases are too often considered in themselves, without sufficiently adverting to the principles which these particular cases involve, and consequently nothing was done or suggested towards altering the system by which these abuses may be perpetuated, nor are they even touched upon in the measures which it is now proposed to submit to the consideration of the legislature.

The prevalence of this system would be bad enough under any circumstances, but the evil becomes aggravated, when it is considered in what way the medical corporations in this country are composed; for I think it will not be denied, that though they may have possessed many individuals, distinguished by their labours or attainments, yet that they have consisted in great part of gentlemen, whose claims, if tested upon the above-mentioned grounds, would not bear a very strict investigation, many having been advanced to these posts through the medium of the hospitals; and it is well known, that by the mode in which hospital elections are conducted, (which is also peculiar to this country,) favoritism, intrigue, active canvassing for votes, (and, in some instances, a direct pecuniary arrangement,) in nine cases out of ten supersedes the *bonâ fide* claims of those who, under a fair and professional mode of competition, would be likely to fill the more elevated posts in the profession with honour and to its advantage; but who, as matters are at present managed, are often deprived of the legitimate means of advancing themselves, and not unfrequently after struggling a few years, finding their efforts unavailing, are obliged to abandon the profession, or succumb to privation or a stagnation of their faculties, so that, as was justly observed with reference to one who had acquired considerable distinction abroad, “a man may be reduced to beggary in England, by pursuing the same course which infallibly leads to the highest distinction in France.” While, on the other hand, by this system, a direct inducement is held out to those who seek to obtain appointments in medical institutions, rather to have recourse to the indirect means adverted to for attaining

their object, than to excel in the path of honourable exertion and competition.

As regards the obnoxious charter granted to, or rather forced upon the council of the College of Surgeons, I will again refer to the evidence of Mr. Guthrie, that forty-eight out of every fifty men in the profession have greatly objected to it. Mr. Guthrie's evidence tends to remove an erroneous impression that has prevailed; for it appears that the council did not apply for the charter, but that it was forced upon them by the minister, notwithstanding their opposition. "After a time, Sir J. Graham signified that he was not satisfied, and desired that certain alterations should be made: these alterations were not agreeable to the council: they did not think that they were consistent with the advantage of the profession or of the public, and *the council, as a body, with the exception of two or three persons*, objected to make the alterations. The Secretary of State was imperative, and insisted that they should do so. Under these circumstances, I advised and moved the council to submit themselves to the Secretary of State's orders, to say at once fairly that we could not agree with him in opinion, that we did not think what he directed to be done was for the benefit of the public, but that we gave the matter up to him, desiring he would do as he pleased."

Now the Secretary of State could know but little of the profession, and of the requirements for its improvement, except from information received from its members, and the result has proved that he was misled by relying too exclusively upon one source for such knowledge, having been obliged to abandon the generally obnoxious measures which he proposed to parliament; and thus it appears that, under our present system, a member of the profession who may possess influence with the minister of the day, has the power (as in the instance of the charter) to cause his views to be adopted and to become law, notwithstanding the remonstrances of the body which has the chief control in the direction of medical affairs, and to inflict injustice and insult upon the bulk of the profession. It is surprising that the council of the College of Surgeons should have submitted against their

judgment to such dictation, and to incur the odium which was sure to ensue upon carrying these views into effect, the more especially as the conduct of their colleague, who, as was pretty generally known, was the minister's principal adviser upon the matter, has been repeatedly and strongly animadverted upon both by the political and medical press ; and I must add, that from corroborative circumstances which have come to my knowledge, I consider the member of the profession alluded to, not to be a very fit person to take a prominent part in the regulation of high and important interests affecting the public welfare. I make this statement, not in the spirit of animosity, but because, as a witness nominated by the committee, acting on behalf of the associated surgeons of England, I think it right that the true state of matters should be made known to those honourable members who have been commissioned by parliament to investigate the subject of medical reform, and from whom the profession may, it is to be hoped, expect some redress of their grievances, which will not be effected by the measures proposed to be submitted to the legislature, as those agreed upon conjointly by the colleges of physicians and surgeons, and the national association of general practitioners ; these propositions being framed in the same spirit as others, which on former occasions have emanated from the corporate bodies ;—viz., for their own advantage, and not tending to benefit or elevate the condition of the profession.

This also applies to the charter required by the College of Physicians, which would not by its being granted be rendered more efficient for the promotion of medical science, or its members thereby raised in public estimation ; the fellowship has been offered to physicians and declined, the parties not thinking it worth while to pay the fee demanded by the college, which has consequently applied elsewhere, and seeks to render admission within its pale compulsory upon all physicians of England and Wales, the paying the fee being indispensable, but examinations being dispensed with ; and as Dr. Hodgkin observes in a recent pamphlet, “ it remains to be seen what effect will ultimately be produced upon the body of general practitioners, in consequence of many of their members volunt-

tarily seeking the distinction of lieentiate, *which, with no little injustice to the original licentiates, has been offered them by the college.*"

Were the propositions of the eonjoint corporations to reeeeive the sanction of parliament, these bodies would still possess the same irresponsible powers, the existing abuses would be perpetuated, the general dissatisfaction would eontinue and inerease, till such time as the legislature could be induced, after mature consideration of impartial evidence, to adopt measures of reform, of a comprehensive and efficient charaeter, such as would bring the medical organization of Great Britain more in aeeordance with that of other countries, whieh has been found most eondueive to the maintenance of the dignity and honour of the profession; to the proteetion of its members against the eneroachments of quaekery, and irregular modes of praetice, and to the welfare of the community.

I beg further to add, that having seen a meeting convened by publie advertisement on behalf of the assoeiated surgeons of England, I attended, and was not personally aequainted with any of the gentlemen present. It was, therefore, quite unex-peeted on my part, that I should be ealled upon to appear as a witness before the parliamentary committee, but having been nominated, I should have considered it a dereliction of duty to refuse to afford any information in my power, whieh might tend to promote the settlement of the important question of medical reform upon a fair and satisfactory basis; and it appeared to me that I eould do so, in a more eonneeted manner, by the written expression of my opinion, and the addueing those of some others, than by mere replies to queries, or by occupying the time of the eommittee by entering before them into the eonsideration of the abuses to whieh I am more espeeially desirous of solieiting attention, and without the abolition of whieh, I feel convineed, with all deferenee to those whose opinions may differ from mine, that no permanently beneficinal reforms are likely to be effected.

London, June, 1848.

APPENDIX.

THE following is an abstract of the course of studies and examinations required of candidates for the medical diploma, at some of the principal continental schools.

In France, after two years' preliminary studies, the degree of Bachelor of Sciences and letters is taken out by passing two examinations. Then follow four years of medical studies in regular order in a faculty—those of a clinical and practical nature being last. There are five examinations, two during the course of studies, the other three at its expiration. Examinations last about two hours, three candidates being examined at a time. In the anatomical and surgical examinations, parts of the body are dissected, and operations (indicated by the examiners) are performed and described, and questions answered relative to them. A thesis is written and defended. Clinical examinations take place at the bedside of the patient. Examinations are public. Examiners receive an annual salary.

In Prussia, there are four examinations, the two first preliminary, the third *rigorosum*, before the professors of the faculty—each examining on subjects relating to his department ; the examination lasts upwards of three hours, three or four candidates being examined at a time. A thesis must be written and defended in the Latin language. After passing these ordeals, the candidate takes the decree of Doctor of Medicine, which may be obtained at any of the Prussian Universities, but does not confer the title to practise, which is granted only after the public State examination in the capital ; this is divided into several parts, and lasts several days. In the anatomical examination, the part to be dissected and described is

drawn from a vase. Dissertations are held on the thesis ; the candidate has charge of two or three patients in the hospitals, is required to take notes, and is examined at the bedside two or three times a week.

In Bavaria, the courses of preliminary study and examinations are even more strict, the former comprising philosophy, logic, physics, chemistry, natural history, &c. ; and in Austria much the same mode is pursued. The State examinations, before examiners not belonging to the educating bodies, being indispensable, in order to obtain the licence to practise. In Italy, several examinations are also required before the diploma is obtained. In England, on the other hand, the candidate is required to produce testimonials of having studied during a certain term, and of having attended a certain number of lectures, and hospital practice, which testimonials may be either forged, or obtained on payment of the fees for the courses, without regular attendance being enforced, and when of the required age, he may immediately present himself for the simply *vivâ voce* examination, lasting from twenty minutes to half an hour, or a little longer, and is thus immediately transformed from a student into a practitioner, holding the same rank as those who may be twice or thrice his age. The examiners have a direct interest in the numbers who come up for examination ; their fees being proportionately larger. No particular preliminary education is required.*

Now when the number of corporate bodies is considered, which are thus empowered to grant licences, it can be no subject of wonder that the profession should be so deteriorated or that the public should encourage the various kinds of quackery which (owing to this cause) are more rife in England than elsewhere. Nor is this state of matters likely to be remedied, so long as the medical corporations are permitted to retain the irresponsible control over the education and examination of practitioners. "This important trust, justly observes Sir James Clark, should be vested in a body in each division of the kingdom, appointed by government, for the exclusive purpose of regulating the course of education, preliminary and professional, and testing candidates for licences to practise. It is because the regulations respecting the education of medical men have been entrusted chiefly to the medical

* An advertisement appeared in the Times a few days ago, from a person who was desirous of passing the examination of the College of Surgeons as speedily as possible, addressed to any one who could facilitate his object.

corporations, that the preliminary education has been so totally neglected; such bodies are not qualified to test candidates on their scientific acquirements. It is not their province, and in no other country, I believe, is such a duty intrusted to them. If the colleges of physicians and surgeons are to have any share in examining candidates, it should be restricted entirely to testing their practical knowledge”

In other countries there exists some central body, for the superintendence of medical affairs. Thus, in France, the Minister of the Interior is at the head of the directing body. In Prussia, Austria, and Bavaria, there are central supreme councils exercising superintendence in matters relating to medical police, the public health, the direction of examining committees, &c., and receiving reports at stated times, relative to these subjects, from the provincial medical councils, consisting of communal or district physicians, and surgeons, and non-medical persons. In the states of Italy, the Proto-medicate, or some analogous body, is instituted for this purpose. In England there is nothing of the kind, nor, in fact, is there any connected system of medical organization, for the protection of the public, or of members of the profession. It is not, therefore, slight or partial reforms of the medical corporations, which will amend the evil of this want of control or superintendence. “The profession, says Dr. Forbes, as a body, must be constituted, governed, and regulated by the state, or by an authority created for this purpose by the state. It will be quite enough for a college to govern and regulate itself in its corporate capacity, and to superintend the medical establishments, which must always form an essential and important part of its constitution.”

I will also quote a passage of Sir James Clark on this point.— “The mere reform of existing medical institutions would have small influence in tranquillising the present agitated state of the profession, because such a partial measure of reform would do little for the great body of practitioners. On the contrary, I am inclined to believe that such a limited reform would produce an injurious effect by giving temporary stability to institutions which are not, and, as far as I can see, cannot be adapted to represent the profession as a body. Reform of the medical corporations would even be of little permanent advantage to themselves, for it is quite certain that any reform of these bodies which has not for its aim and end the good of the whole profession, and the advantage of the public, cannot, and ought not to endure.

“ I would ask the advocates of such a partial measure what are the great objects to be aimed at in reforming the present anomalous state of the profession? Is it not to improve and equalize the education of medical men throughout the country, in order that the public may be supplied with competent medical advisers? Is it not to raise the character of the general practitioner, and to put an end to the discontent which has so long existed in the profession on account of the unequal and generally imperfect education of its members, and the vexatious regulations respecting the privileges of men licensed by different bodies; and finally, is it not to unite the whole profession into one corporate body? Can these objects be attained by reforming institutions, the separate existence of which tends to keep up the very evils complained of, while they exercise little or no beneficial influence on the profession. Such a union of the whole profession as is here advocated, must come; it is inevitable because it is the only reform which is consistent with the natural order of things that is founded in justice, or can place the profession as a body in the position which it ought to hold among the liberal professions.”

“ Were the government to decide that the whole medical profession shall be incorporated into one body, and that to this body only would be granted a charter of incorporation, I firmly believe all obstacles to the union of the colleges would soon be removed, and that in the course of a very few years, we should see the united institutions exercising an influence on the character of the profession and on the progress of medical science far beyond what the present corporations ever did, or ever could do in their separate capacities.”

“ None, I think,” says Mr. Green, “ will venture to say that a candid and unprejudiced inquiry is uncalled for; whether the good of the profession and of the community would not be best consulted by incorporating the College of Physicians and Surgeons of London, not only with the London University, but with the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, in forming a board of examiners for conferring degrees and granting licences to practise.”

Professor Grant and others, who have paid great attention to the subject, also advocate the incorporation of the profession into one body: these observations I have cited in my pamphlet.

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